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Remembering India

by David Pryce-Jones

A review of *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* by Nirad C. Chaudhuri.

Burke
was right!
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Nirad C. Chaudhuri Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921-1952.

Addison-Wesley, 979 pages, $29.95

The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian and now its successor, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, give a portrait of the slow but triumphant self-discovery of a powerful writer. During this process, Nirad Chaudhuri was in the grip of dramatic public events in India. Independence and the partition of the continent in 1948 were widely hailed as statesmanship and the reparation of imperial wrongdoing, but Chaudhuri drew quite another conclusion—that his country had no future.

The British and their counterparts, the Indian nationalists, in his view, had contrived a ruin for which ordinary people had to pay. Slogans about progress and modernity concealed corruption and decadence. Having escaped, Chaudhuri now lives in England, in a mood befitting a wise man of "stern, almost exultant despair."

One of the numerous books to have influenced Chaudhuri was *The Decline of the West*, and he may be seen as an Indian Spengler with a belief in the predestination of history. Granted the nature of the British and the Indians alike, he thinks, misunderstandings between them could only have ended in tragedy. With hindsight, it can be suggested that the British had no need to dig a pit for themselves, but at the time they could not have behaved except as they did. Yet the role of chance in his own literary evolution obliges Chaudhuri to take responsibility for himself and his achievement with a pride which is entirely justified. These books illuminate the mysterious area between literature and politics and individual character.

A large part of Chaudhuri's development rested initially on an adoption of heroic models. It seems marvelous that he could have found them in Kishorganj, where he was born in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. This small town on a river in Bengal was divided into Hindu and Muslim communities immemorially settled in their ways, contented, yet about to be shaken and destroyed by a violence that nobody could have imagined.

There never was a time, Chaudhuri recalls, when he did not know who were the leading personalities of the day, from the Queen and Empress herself to her ministers and generals. The likes of Napoleon, Raphael, Milton, and Burke were household names. His father, part lawyer and part merchant, read him a passage from Shakespeare and made him recite it by heart. Bengalis by the thousand took for granted such familiarity with the world's high culture, it seems, and the Chaudhuri family was by no means exceptional. The youthful Nirad found models of enlightenment in Lytton Strachey, Middleton Murry, Percy Lubbock, and others. In order to read Sorel or Aulard, as well as Rémy de Gourmont and above all Julien Benda, a freethinker like himself, he learned French. Next came German, for the sake of Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* ("Textbook on the Historical Method").

This formidable autodidact writes a splendid rhetorical prose, adorned with quotations and allusions caught on the wing from his eminent peers. Among the multifarious subjects to have fired his imagination was artillery, especially the design of breechblocks, and naval history, French wines, the origins of man, the Latin names of trees and plants, the growth of Calcutta and Delhi, and Western music. Here was someone absorbing equally *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Aeroplane*, and *The Gramophone*. When he found himself alone with the wife who had been married to him according to customary arrangements between families, he asked her to spell Beethoven.

Such a dynamo for acquiring knowledge had an inappropriate frame. Chaudhuri pokes fun at himself as someone just above five feet, weak in physique. At various times he was ill and hungry, with only his father and brothers between him and destitution. Even in the tightest of squeezes, however, he continued to buy books on credit, or a box of educational bricks for his son. It is typical of his combative humor that he describes with delight how he once kicked downstairs a man who offered him a bribe, and also how he beat another, who had insulted him for being a "servant," until this fellow wept. "Gandhi suggested the primitive primate tarsier to me," is a good example of how Chaudhuri combines style and outlook. This passage continues, "But a beatific unworldly look suffused what was basically mere animal innocence," concluding with the sweep, "There was not a trace on his face of the repulsive arrogance which disfigures the face of every Hindu holy man." He likes playfulness, too, as in a chapter entitled "Mount Batten piled on Mount Attlee."

It was all very well to be a strong-minded individualist and libertarian with marked literary tastes, Chaudhuri realized early, but he had to find a proper outlet, too. Moving to Calcutta, he was first a clerk in a department of military accounts, and then a journalist. His first published articles were in English in 1925 and in his native Bengali two years later. So hard was it to advance in literary circles that he is perhaps overanxious in his memoirs to fight again some battles of long ago and far away, reprinting articles which prove him to have been right.

If Chaudhuri was unpopular or marginal, did the fault lie in him or in circumstances? Gradually he sensed that the political climate between the wars was thwarting and depressing not just him but everyone else as well. A complete reappraisal was needed of the relationship between India and Great Britain.

It is moving to read how Chaudhuri came to repudiate Indian nationalism on the one hand and on the other the complacency or self-delusion that the British showed at each step on the road to their rout. He well remembers how the nationalist movement first began, in Bengal in 1906, in response to a British proposal to divide the province for administrative purposes. This could only set Hindus and Muslims against each other. Young men mustered and drilled in secret, revolvers were passed from hand to hand in conspiracies. Chaudhuri's repudiation of nationalism is all the more intense because he himself had once felt these excitements.

Chaudhuri is unsparing in criticizing the British when they deserve it, for their arrogance, for the way that they educated Indians, above all Bengalis, to be like themselves but did not then accept them as equals, on the contrary putting them down with subtle snobbery against which there was no appeal. The presence of the British in India always implied that the two parties must meet on equal terms, and the failure to bring about anything of the kind was a contradiction unbearable to an Indian.

Nationalists argued that the British had conquered an India which had been prospering materially and culturally, only to exploit and plunder it. To Chaudhuri, with his reading of history, this argument was a self-serving lie, and out of it grew his doubts. Eighteenth-century India had been stagnant: Hinduism and Islam had decayed to mere forms. Far from exploiting India, the British had vitalized the whole continent. In all Indian history, Chaudhuri writes, there had been no better

government than that of the British. Many great Bengalis whom he had admired in his childhood had appreciated this, welcoming Anglo-Indian civilization. One example was Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel prize-winning author of works of poetry, drama, fiction, and philosophy, to whom Chaudhuri devotes a chapter of elegy.

Nationalism itself was copied from the British, something factitious and imported, a counter-reaction, unthinkable in the old India of custom and religious identity. Leaders of Indian nationalism like Gandhi and Nehru did not grasp the extent to which they had absorbed British values and were simply transferring them onto Indians. This was the point at which Chaudhuri's own imitation of heroic models served him. He was in a position to judge how much of the nationalist claims involved self-deception and fraudulence. Accordingly he could trust the likes of Gandhi and Nehru neither as firsthand Indians nor as secondhand Englishmen. Manipulating where they had been manipulated, these men were all the more dangerous because so willingly and unconsciously dupes of their careerist ambitions. Under borrowed trappings, the age-old xenophobia of Hindus was easily discerned. Nationalism, Chaudhuri concluded, was nothing more than the mutual hate of Hindus and Muslims, and the hate of both for the British. Such hate was backward-looking, and a menace to him, to his country, and to everything worthwhile in it.

To have set himself against nationalism was not only an intellectual feat but an act of civic courage. Not hiding his opinions, he survived by becoming private secretary to Sarat Chandra Bose, a prominent nationalist and brother of the even better known Subha Chandra Bose. The quarrel between Gandhi and the Bose brothers threatened to split the nationalist movement, but in Chaudhuri's view it was a question of self-assertion, without intellectual significance. *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* contains invaluable eyewitness observations of Gandhi and his entourage, and of the strange and stricken Bose brothers.

The war was an opportunity for the nationalists to weaken Britain by supporting Hitler, an incarnation of Vishnu, as one extremist told Chaudhuri. Subha Chandra Bose fled to Germany, then to Japan, where he raised a collaborationist army. Sarat Chandra Bose was arrested. Even their wartime sentiments should not be considered real defiance of the British, but rather an expression of the wish to be on the winning side which Chaudhuri finds a dominant and despicable trait in his countrymen.

Committing himself to the Allies, Chaudhuri became a commentator on All India Radio, putting to good use his knowledge of military matters. He felt a pain in the heart when in December 1941 Japanese aircraft sank the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*(not the *Renown*, as he calls the ship in a rare lapse).

By 1945, the British were in a position of apparent strength in India, where Wavell and Auchinleck commanded veteran divisions, and the nationalists had been thoroughly discredited. Subha Chandra Bose had died in a flying accident on his way to surrender to the Soviets, but other leading collaborators were arrested. Failure to bring them to trial created the impression that British policy could be deflected by agitation and rioting. The man in the street concluded that the British hesitated because they were actually weak, and he rallied not to the nationalist cause, because effectively there was no such unitary thing, but to his own people, Hindu or Muslim, each seeking to win as much as possible. Communal massacres, partition into India and Pakistan and then Bangladesh, and incessant warfare and instability have been the result.

If the British had been ceding to *force majeure*, Chaudhuri might have forgiven them. But such was not the case. Rather, their abandonment of India was due to a loss of will. The charge against the British is that they played fast and loose with the Indian future, abrogating responsibility for those they ruled, introducing chaos, *ratting*, in Chaudhuri's dismissive word.

Perhaps the most absurd of misconceptions was that Gandhi was a genuine representative of the people, with a genuine constituency behind him, and a holy man besides. Holiness in India, Chaudhuri emphasizes, is a factor of power. Defining themselves primarily as Hindus or Muslims, Indians could be mobilized into fanatical mobs defending what they believed to be group interests and identities, but constituencies, as understood in the West, could not be made of them. Britain in effect handed over the continent to those Hindus or Muslims who had the ruthlessness to fanaticize and then tyrannize their own kind for their own purposes.

To Chaudhuri, the secondhand or imitation Englishman had won, and India at once became a pitiful Third World landmass, emitting for all to hear the unlovely complaints of those who have lost true identity and self-respect. What he calls "the Oxfam spirit" rules—in other words, the eagerness of the poor to be humiliated by accepting charity from do-gooding organizations like Oxfam (Oxford Committee for

Famine Relief). In the way in which they grabbed whatever rewards were available, literally looting the state, the nationalists proved what their values were. Everyone could see who was the winning side now, and made sure to be on it. Anglo-Indian civilization has come to nothing. What Chaudhuri mourns in particular is the death of his own Bengali tradition. In places like Kishorganj, fathers now have never heard of Shakespeare, Raphael, or Napoleon. No brilliant child now sits on the river bank as he once did, deep into Remy de Gourmont or breech-blocks, or whatever the modern equivalent might be. There will never be another Tagore. India has been rebarbarized.

In the eyes of many Hindus, Chaudhuri occupies a position like Salman Rushdie's among Muslims. (In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie describes Chaudhuri's intelligence as "impish and colonial") Both men are regarded as renegades, traitors to their own kind, who have put themselves beyond the pale by moving to England and publishing their critiques from its safe confines. In fact the two writers are not comparable. Rushdie is another in the line of imitators, drawing from Western education a disaffection completely characteristic of the contemporary Western intellectual, leading him to satirize the British and Muslims alike. In these memoirs and in other writings, notably *A Passage to England*, Chaudhuri has in contrast examined the inner nature of the British and their culture, seeking to fathom the reasons why the British abandoned the Indians so abruptly and shamefully, canceling out the good work of two centuries.

What he has discovered is the real shock of his life, and an irony which seems to mock his most profound aspirations. At the very moment when high-minded Indians like himself were adapting for themselves the heroic models of British civilization, that civilization was losing faith in itself, ceasing to be humane and universal. Indians were acquiring a beautiful but empty shell, without substance and spirit. Thanks to nationalism, Indians received from Western civilization what was not worth having. What with spreading Americanization as well, the future now holds only the "mindless aping of the lowest things in the Western democratic culture." Rulers and ruled meet at last on equal terms, but the meeting serves no civilizing purpose to either. How could Indians have guessed this fate, or protected themselves against the turn of history? Chaudhuri is the first person from what was once the

British Empire to have the insight that the British betrayed others for whom they were responsible because they had already betrayed themselves.

It is pointless to repine. For him to have settled in England and to have written his books may also reveal that Chaudhuri does not push the logic of predetermination to an absolute conclusion. Why else should his despair be exultant? In an epilogue, he makes a fine last-ditch defense of the powers of the mind against unreason and ignorance. In spite of everything, there remains the word, or, as this fierce and solitary critic of the mass age might prefer, *magna est veritas et praevalet*.